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Statistical capacity-building

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-fifth session.* It contains a description of the current work programme of the Statistics Division in the area of technical cooperation as well as its funding mechanisms. Furthermore, it describes new directions and future plans. Points for discussion are included in paragraph 15.

* *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2004, Supplement No. 4* (E/2004/24), chap. I.A.

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I. Introduction

1. The mission of the Statistics Division's technical cooperation programme is to assist Member States to build strong national statistical systems, which in turn are the building blocks of a solid global statistical system. An effective national statistical system must meet key data needs for results-based management and policy decision-making in a sustainable manner. It includes the following two main elements: (i) a well-run national statistical service, based on an appropriate legal and institutional framework and equipped with sufficient financial and human resources, as well as Information Technology (IT) infrastructure; and (ii) regular programmes of data collection and analysis, including effective data retrieval and dissemination (population and housing censuses, integrated programme of household surveys, coherent systems administrative records for collecting data in specific economic, social and environmental sectors).

2. Both Economic and Social Council and the Statistical Commission have provided the Division with strong mandates for technical cooperation. For instance, Economic and Social Council reaffirmed "the importance of national efforts to build statistical capacity in all countries, including through statistical training, and of effective international support in that context for developing countries".[1]

3. The Statistical Commission has repeatedly emphasized that technical cooperation efforts need to be nationally owned, demand driven and tailored to the local needs, as well as effectively coordinated among the various international donors.[2] Furthermore, in 2004 the Commission stated explicitly the urgency for statistical capacity-building efforts, by noting in its report[3] "If availability of statistics needed at national and international levels, including those needed to effectively monitor the implementation and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, was to be achieved, further investment in the development of sustainable statistical capacity, especially in countries with the least developed statistical services, would be required".

4. Moreover, as a consequence of the debate on the Millennium Development Goals as well as on other United Nations conference goals, there is currently widespread awareness and recognition of the importance of statistical capacity-building: At the "International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results" (Marrakech 2004), aid recipients and donor stakeholders adopted the Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS), aiming at ensuring that all countries possess basic statistical infrastructure and data-collection programmes.[4]

5. The United Nations Statistics Division has a long history of a successful technical cooperation programme, which builds on the Division's credibility of technical competence. In its areas of expertise (e.g., censuses and surveys, national accounts, statistical organization) the Division has been working in partnership with numerous countries and regions in the world. Furthermore, technical cooperation in statistics is an integral part of the Division's work programme and closely related to its work on standard setting. This ensures that Division advisory services are up to date with respect to the latest conceptual and methodological developments. Finally, the United Nations is perceived to be a politically neutral partner in technical cooperation efforts.

6. Member States who have worked with the United Nations Statistics Division as partners in technical cooperation programmes have consistently provided positive

feedback, pointing to measurable impact on national and subregional statistical programmes. One frequently quoted result is that cooperation with the Division instils in national statistical systems a sense of being part of the larger global statistical community. In particular, the development account projects have created strong subregional networks of statisticians, at the management as well as the working level. Further evidence of the tangible impact of Division projects is the fact that many countries adopt international recommendations. This is true for the organizational sphere — countries have applied United Nations Statistics Division recommendations in the restructuring of their national statistical systems — as well as for the scientific and professional sphere — countries have for instance improved the content and the presentation of their census questionnaire.

7. For the above-mentioned reasons, the Division is playing a lead role in global statistical capacity-building efforts. The present report briefly describes the funding mechanisms and the current programme activities; it then develops the strategic priorities, which are based on a new focus on strengthening foundation statistics (see section IV).

II. United Nations Statistics Division sources of assistance to support statistical development

8. The regular programme of the United Nations Statistics Division provides the funding for methodological development, in particular the preparation of handbooks, which are an important input in subsequent direct technical assistance activities. Examples of recent publications, which have proven to be very valuable in a technical assistance context are the *Handbook of Statistical Organization* and the handbook entitled *National Accounts: A Practical Introduction*.

9. The main sources of funding for direct technical cooperation activities available to the Division are threefold: the regular programme for technical cooperation; the United Nations Development Account; and external budgetary projects and trust funds.[5]

(a) *Regular programme for technical cooperation*. This programme is approved biennially by the General Assembly as part of the United Nations Statistics Division's regular programme activities. It currently provides funding for:

(i) Two interregional advisers at Headquarters. These are two medium-term positions for senior statisticians with expertise in high-demand areas, who can provide countries with technical advice upon request. The current priority areas are national accounts and population and housing censuses.

(ii) Fellowships. This component of the Division's technical cooperation programme is intended to respond to specific needs of Member States for enhanced national skills development and training.

(iii) Training workshops. The Division is organizing about five to seven international statistical workshops per year. These workshops usually have a regional focus and are implemented in close cooperation with the Regional Commissions and other regional and subregional organizations. Each workshop is dedicated to one specific statistical subject matter from the broad spectrum of the Division's technical expertise (census taking, social statistics,

disability statistics, national accounts, environmental accounts, industry statistics, energy statistics, environmental statistics, trade statistics, classifications, statistical organization, etc).

(b) *United Nations Development Account.* This funding mechanism is provided by the General Assembly. The various development sectors inside the United Nations compete for these funds by presenting project proposals that have a strong regional capacity-building orientation. Project proposals are approved every two years. The United Nations Statistics Division has so far been successful to secure funding for four development account projects in the field of statistics since 1999. They covered a total of over 50 countries in the regions of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Each of these projects is implemented under the executive leadership of a steering committee, consisting of the Chief Statisticians of the Member States involved, who determine project priorities and implementation modalities and ensure sustainability of the project activities after the project is phased out.

(c) *External budgetary projects and trust funds.* In past years these extrabudgetary resources consisted primarily of national or regional project funds allocated by UNDP or the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to the area of statistics, in which the Division was the implementing agency. Their volume far exceeded the Division regular programme of technical cooperation. However, this source of funding has significantly declined and is at this point negligible. The Division is currently improving its resource mobilization capacities in order to diversify its funding partnerships to include other multilateral and bilateral partners.

III. Technical cooperation activities in 2004

10. In 2004, the interregional technical advisers covered 14 countries, providing advisory services on a broad range of issues including concepts and compilation techniques for national accounts; institutional sector accounting; evaluation of the System of National Accounts, 1993 (1993 SNA) implementation; use of scanning technology and intelligent character recognition for censuses; hand-held devices for censuses; data warehousing; data mining; data security, and latest developments in database management systems for official statistics. After a review of the programme priorities and owing to the high demand of advisory services in connection with the preparation of the 2005-2014 census round, it was decided to strategically reorient one of the adviser positions as of 2005 to cover the area of census preparations and management rather than general IT support.

11. In 2004 the United Nations Statistics Division organized 16 workshops for developing countries, at which a total of 348 professionals from over 100 national statistical offices were trained on census methodologies, trade statistics, national accounts, classifications, indicators to monitor progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, environment and energy statistics, environmental accounting, water accounting, poverty statistics, and improving statistics on fertility, mortality and disability. These workshops were conducted in collaboration with Regional Commissions, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN-HABITAT and the Division for Sustainable Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. In addition study tours for 53 statisticians from 48 countries were arranged to provide individual

training, reinforce existing networks for the exchange of practical experience and to create opportunities for statistical experts from developing countries to participate in international statistical forums such as the conference of the International Association for Official Statistics.

12. The United Nations Statistics Division continued its successful implementation of the regional development accounts. The ESCWA project (2002-2004) was brought to a successful conclusion by a two-day evaluation workshop, in which the heads of the national statistical offices participated. The evaluation workshop identified the mechanism of the steering committee as one of the key success criteria, which ensured national ownership and allowed for the necessary flexibility to make adjustments in the project implementation during its three-year life span. The Chief Statisticians also underscored the importance of the project element "Statistical Organization and Management", as some countries in the ESCWA region are in the process of reforming their statistical infrastructure or are simply facing comparable challenges with respect to statistical legislation, establishing the national statistical office as the authoritative source of official statistics and/or using limited financial resources most effectively to satisfy user demand.

13. The evaluation seminar concluded that the project had not only been successful in transferring knowledge from outside to the countries in the region, but more importantly that it had created a network of statisticians at the working level, which in turn lead to an extremely valuable exchange of practical experiences. The United Nations Statistics Division also launched a regional project in the ECOWAS region (2004-2006), with two workshops conducted in 2004 on poverty measurement and on "user-producer" relationships. The project was carefully designed to build upon and/or complement already existing support activities in the region by the European Union, UNDP, ECA and Afristat. For the period 2006-2008 the Division has submitted a project proposal for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

IV. Future strategic orientations

14. Given the available human and financial resources, it is essential for the United Nations Statistics Division to focus its technical cooperation efforts. The following four strategic priorities have therefore been decided:

(a) Provision of direct technical cooperation services in areas of the United Nations Statistics Division excellence

In terms of subject matter areas, the Division will focus on those fields where it has a strong technical comparative advantage, such as population and housing censuses. In so doing, the Division will be taking advantage of the close link between its ongoing methodological work and technical cooperation projects. In this context, the Division will use its regular resources more effectively, by making technical advisory services, workshops and fellowships mutually supportive, rather than separate, isolated activities. For its areas of excellence, the Division is confident that it will be able to attract additional external resources.

(b) Strengthening existing subregional networks

The United Nations Statistics Division will build on its success of the development account projects, which created networks of national experts at the Chief Statisticians level as well as at the working level among groups of 10-15 countries, who share a common socio-economic context and often share a language. The Division will devote its efforts to sustain subregional networks, in order to facilitate the exchange of practical experiences, and to promote common training and even specific common projects (census questionnaire, data-processing systems). A stronger focus over the coming years will be on Africa (ECOWAS and SADC projects), a region that has been identified as a high priority area for statistical capacity-building.

(c) Strategic partnerships and donor coordination

The United Nations Statistics Division will seek to renew or extend partnerships with major multilateral donors (World Bank, UNDP, UNFPA, UNEP) as well as with Regional Commissions, specialized agencies and bilateral donors in the context of specific projects. The Division will actively support global donor coordination efforts, in particular in the area of building basic statistical capacity to construct and analyse Millennium Development Goals indicators.

(d) Fostering exchange of practical experiences and strengthening statistical training

Recognizing the importance of the human resource factor for sustainable statistical development, the United Nations Statistics Division will continue to foster the exchange of practical experiences among national statisticians, wherever possible. It will globally review existing professional statistical training centres and their respective areas of expertise and create channels of communication and dialogue between them, in order to explore potential synergies, e.g., sharing of training materials.

V. Points for discussion

15. The Commission may wish to comment on the strategic focus for technical cooperation activities of the Statistics Division as described in the present report.

Notes

[1] See Economic and Social Council resolution 2000/27.

[2] These requirements for success are best summarized in the "Guiding principles for good practices in technical cooperation", which were adopted by the Statistical Commission in 1999.

[3] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2004, Supplement No. 24* (E/200 24), chap. V.D., para. 7 (e).

[4] See also E/CN.3/2005/20, report of the Secretary-General on indicators for monitoring the Millennium Development Goals and for follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields.

[5] In addition to these funding mechanisms, the United Nations Statistics Division is allocated a limited portion of the revenue generated by the sales of its data and publications. Some of these resources may also be used for technical cooperation activities.